

## SUMMARY

# Links between young peoples' reasons for choosing a study programme and drop-out in higher education

This report identifies the factors that young people prioritise when choosing a study programme and examines whether there is a link between reasons for choosing a study programme and students dropping out from their study programme during the first year. The analysis provides answers to the following questions:

- What reasons do young people give for choosing their study programme? (chapter 2)
- Are there links between the reasons young people give for choosing their study programme and the risk of dropping out of the study programme later? In addition, can some linkages be interpreted as indicators of causal relationships (effects)? (chapter 3)
- What characterises young people whose reasons for choosing a study programme are likely to be linked to drop-out? (chapter 4)

## Background

Approximately 90,000 young people apply to join a higher education programme in Denmark every year. Their choice of programme has a great influence on their future working life and their life in general. Choosing a study programme is a big decision, and for young people it may be a difficult choice, despite a wealth of advice from their surroundings – emphasising choosing a study programme based on criteria such as academic interest, good job prospects or a future high income.

This report provides insight into the reasons why young people choose their study programmes and how the reasoning behind their decisions is linked to the probability of them dropping out at some point.

In a previous analysis, the Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA) showed that young people who are certain about their choice of study programme will have a significantly lower risk of dropping out during their first year compared to young people who are not certain about their choice (2018). On what do young people base their choice of a study programme? In 2017, EVA demonstrated that, to a great extent, young people use both their heart and head when choosing a study programme. This report builds on this knowledge and provides a more in-depth look at the reasons behind young people's choice of study programme.

International research has shown a link between the reasoning behind a student's choice of study programme and dropping out of the programme (Harvey, Drew, & Smith (2006) and Tinto (1993)). The Danish Ministry of Higher Education and Science (2018) has found that students who change study programmes often place a higher emphasis on academic interest and job prospects when making their second choice. This indicates that the basis of their choice changes between the first and second time they choose a study programme, and it may indicate increased reflection on the choice second time around. In a Danish context, no comprehensive research has been carried out

regarding the reasons behind why students choose a study programme and how this is connected to their risk of dropping out.

## Target groups

This report presents new knowledge relevant to several target groups: student counsellors at the seven regional education and career guidance centres; staff in upper secondary education and higher education programmes who help students to choose their study programmes; and staff in higher education programmes working with retention. Furthermore, this report can contribute to a broader education policy debate, in which the choice of study programme by young people is frequently discussed. It can also be a source of inspiration for young people about how to choose a study programme.

## Results

The report has five main results, and these are described below.

### **1. Young people use both their heart and head to choose a study programme.**

Young people mainly listen to their heart when choosing a higher education programme, but they also use their head. The majority base their choice on academic interest in the study programme. In 2018, 90% of the intake of students responded that, to a high degree or very high degree, academic interest was a decisive factor in their choice of programme. Furthermore, 63% responded that becoming more knowledgeable was a decisive factor in their choice of study programme.

However, young people also consider life after completing their study programme: In 2018, 56% of the intake responded that good job prospects were a decisive factor in their choice of study programme. Furthermore, 39% of the intake responded that the geographic location of the programme determined their choice of study programme. In 2018, fewer young people considered high income and prestige as determining factors (25% and 11%, respectively).

The reasons why young people choose a study programme were similar in 2016, 2017 and 2018, and similar when conducting separate analyses for universities, university colleges and academies of professional higher education.

### **2. Young people who choose a study programme based on academic interest have a significantly lower risk of drop-out.**

Analyses show that young people who choose a study programme based on academic interest have a significantly lower risk of dropping out of their programme during the first year. For students accepted during the summer of 2016, the drop-out rate during the first year was 18% for those who based their choice of programme on academic interest. The rate was 29% for students who did not prioritise academic interest.

When statistically and methodologically isolating the effect of study choice on drop-out risk, young people who choose a study programme based on academic interest are 6 percentage points less likely to drop out of their programme during the first year compared to young people who do not base their choice of study programme on academic interest. The total drop-out rate for students admitted to higher education programmes in 2016 was 19%. Seen in this light, the difference of 6

percentage points constitutes an effect of significant proportion. The analyses therefore also indicate that selecting a study programme based on academic interest protects students from dropping out during their first year.

### **3. Young people who choose a study programme to please their family or in order to be admitted to another study programme have an increased risk of drop-out.**

Young people who choose a study programme to please their family or in order to get into another study programme have an increased risk of dropping out during their first year.

- All things being equal, young people who choose a study programme to please their family and make them proud are 2 percentage points more likely to drop out.
- All things being equal, young people who choose a study programme in order to be admitted to another programme are 3 percentage points more likely to drop out.

### **4. Young people who choose a study programme based on the reasons related to an increased risk of drop-out share several characteristics.**

This report shows several common characteristics for young people who base their choice of study programme on the three reasons related to drop-out. The three reasons are: if the young person does *not* base their choice of study programme on academic interest; chooses a study programme to please their family; or chooses it to increase their chances of being admitted to another study programme.

The common characteristics for these young people are that, in general, they have a lower grade point average (a majority with an average of 7 or less), fewer of them were admitted to their first priority programme, and a lower proportion are of Danish descent. Among young people who do *not* choose a study programme based on academic interest, a larger percentage are, furthermore, less motivated to begin a programme, and a larger percentage are less certain about their choice of programme.

### **5. Most of the reasons for choosing a study programme cannot be linked to drop-out.**

In most cases, the reasons behind a young person's choice of study programme has no influence on their risk of subsequently dropping out. For seven out of the ten reasons for choosing a study programme, e.g. high income, prestige and geographic location, there are no indications that making a choice based on those reasons - or, alternatively, disregarding them - affects students' risk of dropping out.

## Perspectives

The analyses in this report give rise to perspectives that may be useful inspiration to the target groups of the report.

### **Consider measures aimed at the basis for choosing study programmes**

This report shows that young people who base their choice of study programme on academic interest are less likely to drop out of their programme, are often certain of their choice, and are motivated to begin their studies. The results thus indicate that it might be a good idea for student counsellors to advise young people to select an education programme that matches their academic interest rather than choosing a study programme based on the wishes and needs of others.

The analyses also show that this advice may not be so easy to follow for everyone. Young people who do not choose a study programme based on academic interest, or who choose a study programme to please their family, share similar characteristics, e.g. low grades. This group of young people may find it more difficult to identify - and gain admission to - a programme that matches their academic interest. This means they may be less certain about their choice and less motivated to begin their studies. Based on this, the analyses indicate that it is worth considering how this group of young people can be better supported in their choice of study programme, e.g. through measures aimed at increasing reflection and certainty with regard to selecting a study programme.

### **Encourage young people to think about both student life and the time beyond when choosing a study programme.**

The analyses only pertain to links between choice of study programme and the first year of study. However, choice of higher education plays a major role in the future of these young adults. It is, therefore, important that young people are supported in gaining a strategic perspective on their choice of study programme; a perspective that goes beyond the period of study.

The analyses show that the majority of reasons for choosing a study programme cannot be linked to drop-out. The results, therefore, indicate that young people - with some important exceptions (see above) - can select their study programme for whatever reason they wish, e.g. prestige, high income or becoming more knowledgeable, without having to worry about whether their choice of study programme will affect their risk of drop-out. However, it is important to be aware that this result does not mean that the reasons for choosing a programme are not important. For example, it is likely that young people who choose a study programme based on job prospects or expected income will find it easier to get a job after completing their studies compared to other young people who did not include such factors when considering their choice of study programme. The Danish Ministry of Higher Education and Science (2018) found that students who switch study programmes often place a higher emphasis on academic interest and job prospects when making their second choice of study programme. The results indicate that, when young people make their second - and, presumably, more carefully considered - choice of study programme, they consider both student life and the time beyond. Based on the results of the analysis, there is reason to believe that we can help young people to avoid choosing a study programme based on reasons that often lead to drop-out, provided we help strengthen their ability to reflect on the different reasons for choosing a study programme at an earlier stage.

## Data basis for the report

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The report is based on data from the EVA student panel. This panel has since 2016 followed students enrolled in higher education through several surveys during their first year of study. The report includes questionnaire data from the first questionnaires for the 2016, 2017 and 2018 cohorts. The questionnaire was distributed in August 2016, August 2017 and August 2018, just after the students learned that they had been admitted, but before they commenced their programmes. In 2016, 24,674 students responded to the questionnaire, corresponding to a response rate of 55.7%. In 2017, there were 24,745 respondents and a response rate of 55.9%. In 2018, there were 21,824 respondents and a response rate of 40.9%. Register data from Statistics Denmark was then added to the dataset, as well as drop-out data from higher education institutions.